

## Essays in Philosophy

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Volume 5  
Issue 2 *Animal Ethics*

Article 7

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6-2004

### Review of “Michael Dummett”

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#### Recommended Citation

Corcoran, John (2004) "Review of “Michael Dummett”," *Essays in Philosophy*: Vol. 5: Iss. 2, Article 7.

Essays in Philosophy is a biannual journal published by Pacific University Library | ISSN 1526-0569 | <http://commons.pacificu.edu/eip/>

# Essays in Philosophy

A Biannual Journal

Vol. 5 No. 2, June 2004

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## Book Review

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*Michael Dummett*, by Bernhard Weiss. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002. x + 197 pp. Bibliography and Index. ISBN 069111329-7 Hardcover; ISBN 069111330-0 Paperback.

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The Princeton University Press *Philosophy Now* series which includes this book is described as follows. “This is a fresh and vital series of new introductions to today’s most read, discussed and important philosophers. Combining rigorous analysis with authoritative exposition, each book gives clear and comprehensive access to the ideas of those philosophers who have made a truly fundamental and original contribution to the subject. Together the volumes comprise a remarkable gallery of the thinkers who have been at the forefront of philosophical ideas.”

The back cover describes this book as follows using passages taken from the book. “This book offers, in an accessible and no-nonsense manner, a systematic presentation of the main elements of Dummett’s pivotal contribution to contemporary philosophy. Its overarching theme is his discussion of realism: Bernhard Weiss explores the philosopher’s characterization of realism, his attack on realism, and his invention and exploration of the anti-realist position.” After reading the book, I cannot agree that its presentation is accessible – I found it very difficult reading. Later in this review I describe its peculiar manner of inaccessibility. Moreover, I cannot agree it has a “no-nonsense” style – I found the writing contrived, self-conscious and obscure. Time after time I found myself stopping mid-sentence and starting over. And, as I will explain below, there is room to doubt whether it presents the main elements of Dummett’s philosophy.

Before describing the book’s character, I need to reveal its content. What follows is again from the back cover. “The book begins by examining Dummett’s views on language. Only against that setting can one fully appreciate his conception of the realism issue. With this in place, Weiss returns to Dummett’s views on the nature of meaning and understanding to unfold his challenge to realism. Weiss devotes the remainder of the book to examining the anti-realist position. He discusses anti-realist theories of meaning and then investigates anti-realism’s revisionary consequences. Finally, he engages with Dummett’s discussion of two difficult challenges for the anti-realist: the past and mathematics.” In the Acknowledgements, Weiss reports that during the writing of the book he corresponded with “and then visited Michael Dummett”. Thus, from these remarks, in light of the series description, we are led to expect an exposition of the most central features of Dummett’s philosophical writings with some special fine-tuning only possible through personal communication with the great man. At least that is what I was looking forward to when I agreed to review this book.

The book begins in a way that raises hopes that the promise of interpretation and exposition will be fulfilled. But the promise is not to be fulfilled. Page two displays two substantial quotes from Dummett's writings, but ominously does not interpret them even though both beg for interpretation by a writer versed in Dummett's thought. In the second of these quotes Dummett says that "the (sic) goal of philosophy is the analysis of the structure of thought". Weiss gives no clue that he realizes what a remarkable passage he has quoted or that the reader would wonder whether the context may have supplied explanation or qualification that would change the character of this unusual pronouncement. After page two Dummett quotations are rare: the next does not come until page 165, nearly the end of the 169 pages of main text. Weiss claims to "engage" with Dummett, but Dummett has difficulty getting a word in edgewise. Besides the three mentioned there are no other quotes from Dummett's published writings, and absolutely not a word from the alleged correspondence, and no reference in the text to the "visit". We are never told just what is in the correspondence or what was said in the visit.

Weiss does not let Dummett speak for himself. Weiss does not routinely offer interpretative statements of Dummett's view followed by quotations from Dummett's writings ratifying the interpretations. Weiss does not quote passages from Dummett and then follow up with Weiss' own interpretation. On the contrary, page after page we find Weiss simply attributing various views to Dummett. The reader is expected to have blind faith in the accuracy and integrity of Weiss' pronouncements.

One aspect of the book's inaccessibility is its insularity – it seems to be written by an insider for insiders, it shows no awareness that the outside even exists much less might want some background or clarification of the insider dogmas. An especially flagrant example was mentioned above: Dummett's belief that "the (sic) goal of philosophy is the (sic) analysis of the (sic) structure of thought". Weiss shows no awareness that many if not most philosophers would find this belief to be extreme, astoundingly exclusionary, perhaps insulting. But there is no shortage of less obvious examples. On page one we learn that Dummett's main teachers at Oxford were Urmson and Anscombe, "the latter exerting the greater influence". Presumably, the reader knows who these people are and what Anscombe's influence was. We are not told another thing about either, except in the index where Anscombe's initials are given. We are not even told what Dummett's dissertation was about, or what its title was. In the first of the two quotes on page two we are told of the shocking "fact that Frege, a philosopher whom he [Dummett] profoundly admires, held some extremely racist views". But the only evidence we are given is a quote by Dummett that says nothing about racism, but only that Dummett was shocked when he read Frege's diary. We never learn just what Frege said. We are not given an opportunity to decide for ourselves whether Frege expressed views that we would regard as racist, and if so whether borderline racist, marginally racist, firmly racist, or extremely racist. Ironically, even though Dummett does not quote the offending Frege passage, he complains that Frege's editors "chose to suppress" the diary passage in question. Could it have occurred to Dummett that he too was suppressing the Frege passage? Could it have occurred to Weiss that Dummett had made an inadvertent omission that he, Weiss, had the power to correct for the benefit of outsiders?

One of the several things that give the book's writing style an aura of awkward self-consciousness is its handling of gender-specific pronouns. It is widely accepted today that sexist writing, whether that of the male chauvinist or of the feministic zealot, is out of place in scholarly writing, which

strives to avoid irrelevant issues even when these issues are not inherently distasteful, mean-spirited or bigoted. Weiss is conspicuously careful in avoiding sexist writing. Unfortunately, he avoids it in a way that forces the issues into the consciousness of the reader, thus raising unpleasantness and distracting the reader from relevant issues. Weiss uses the female-specific pronouns where gender-neutral pronouns are required, and he does this in absolutely every case where he is faced with the choice between male-specific and female-specific forms. It is as if every few pages he feels the need to remind the reader: “Attention, I am no sexist.” He reminds me of the good-hearted but insensitive person who routinely helps the handicapped, even where the handicapped do not want the help and even where the handicapped find the help demeaning or humiliating. Actually, Weiss goes beyond this sad point in seeming to expect credit for his righteousness.

I found that the book’s design made study and reflection unnecessarily arduous and tedious. The near absence of quotes is one example. For another, the notes do not come at the foot of the page, nor even at the end of the chapter; they are all inconveniently collected on the last eleven pages of the book. Even worse, many of the notes should not have been notes at all: some are citations that would have been more conveniently incorporated into the text using the author’s own abbreviating scheme given on page ix, some are just short parenthetical remarks, some (like note 3 of chapter 6) give explanation of notation needed in the text and some are gratuitous side comments. Some seem to be novice mistakes. Note 3 of chapter 5 reads: “*Pace* fictionalists about mathematics, who think that mathematics is false.” The next one, note 4 of chapter 5, reads: “A construction is simply a chain of mathematical reasoning.” Weiss should tell that to Euclid, or to Kant, or to an intuitionist.

There are many puzzling incongruities in this book. In describing Dummett’s character, after mentioning Dummett’s “books on voting procedures, grammar and writing style and the game of Tarot”, Weiss tells us that Dummett’s “enthusiasm for Tarot has spawned two books (a third is in preparation) ... a testament both to his intellectual curiosity and to his sense of responsibility towards knowledge and its preservation”. Weiss gives us no clue as to how such productive enthusiasm for a card game could be a testament to these lofty virtues. Moreover, Weiss says nothing about the content of the Tarot books. Do they discuss the evolution of the game, winning strategies, the legendary successes of using Tarot cards in fortune-telling, the most effective Tarot-based fortune-telling techniques, the connections between Tarot and analytic philosophy? Do they unmask the fraudulence of Tarot-based fortune-telling? In reading the Weiss account of the spectrum of topics that Dummett has written about, I was surprised to find no mention of Dummett’s important role in the dialogue on the issue of biblical-versus-hierarchical grounding of the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. Dummett, a practicing Roman Catholic, is an outspoken critic of “higher criticism” and a firm defender of the right of the Church to dictate what Catholics must believe. One of his opponents wrote: “Professor Dummett does not speak for the Catholic laity but for a small group of reactionary intellectuals”. Is this a significant fact about Dummett that Weiss innocently overlooked? Or is it a point that Weiss would find uncomfortable to mention? And once Dummett’s faith is known we are faced with the puzzle about how a Christian can be an anti-realist. Does Dummett think that God’s existence is, in Weiss’ words, “mind-dependent” or “language-dependent”? (The information just used is available from Google searches “DUMMETT CATHOLIC” and “DUMMETT STUMP”).

Contrary to the stated goal of the series, this book does not attempt to provide “clear and comprehensive access to the ideas of” Michael Dummett. It does not offer, “in an accessible and

no-nonsense manner, a systematic presentation of the main elements of Dummett's pivotal contribution to contemporary philosophy" Rather, "Its overarching theme is his discussion of realism: Bernhard Weiss explores the philosopher's characterization of realism, his attack on realism, and his invention and exploration of the anti-realist position." If a comprehensive exposition of Dummett's contributions to philosophy exists, I do not know of it.

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